

VZCZCXRO3017
RR RUEHCN RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHCHI #0060/01 1200945
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 300945Z APR 09
FM AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1032
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 1114

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000060

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR G/TIP, EAP AND DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [KTIP](#) [KWMN](#) [PHUM](#) [TH](#)
SUBJECT: STATE DEPT GRANTEE HIGHLIGHTS RISKS OF TRAFFICKING TO
VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

CHIANG MAI 00000060 001.2 OF 002

Sensitive but unclassified; please handle accordingly.

Summary and Comment

¶1. (SBU) Consulate staff spent the night in a hill tribe village April 7-8 to monitor an NGO's implementation of a \$20,000 grant it had received from the Department's Women's Issues Fund to conduct anti-trafficking-in-persons campaigns. Village authorities and the NGO have different views of the extent of the trafficking problem there. With the grant, this NGO - the New Life Center (NLC) -- has carried out the campaign among over 7,000 highlanders in some 30 villages, far surpassing the target of 2,500 people it had set as a target in its grant proposal.

¶2. (SBU) Comment: Mission Thailand has a strong relationship with the New Life Center, founded and run by American Baptist missionaries. The Ambassador has visited its Chiang Mai shelter, as has Mrs. John, who has also visited and donated books to the Center's Chiang Rai shelter. Commensurate with G/TIP's current focus on labor trafficking, we note that the NLC has chosen trafficking for labor exploitation as the key theme of the campaign it is carrying out with the grant. We encourage the Department to give favorable consideration to further funding requests by the NLC to support this campaign and its other activities. End Summary and Comment.

American NGO Focuses on Labor Trafficking

¶3. (U) On April 7, New Life Center staff took us to an Akha hill tribe village in northern Thailand's second-largest province of Chiang Rai to observe a campaign the Center is carrying out to prevent trafficking-in-persons with a grant it had received from the Department's Women's Issues Fund (WIF). The NLC's interactive approach consists of preparing short stage productions in local hill tribe languages about the risks of trafficking, and acting them out with Center residents and staff. This particular village is composed of three distinct groups broken down by religion: animists, Catholics, and other Christian denominations. All three groups were well-represented at the production; the audience totaled about 300 people.

¶4. (U) In the NLC-produced drama, two hill tribe villagers are promised jobs in South Korea by an acquaintance. When they get to Korea, they find themselves subjected to forced labor in an isolated agricultural setting. Their documents are confiscated, and they are not given adequate food and water. When they ask if they can leave, they are told they are in debt for all the expenses the company incurred to get them to Korea, and that if

they don't have money they have to repay the debt by working. Back in their home village in Thailand, a mother whose daughter had left for Korea laments that she no longer receives money. After the passage of several months or years, the women are able to escape and return to their village, though the production does not go into detail about how.

15. (U) Before the drama, NLC staff and residents sang songs and played interactive games with younger spectators. They also asked the adults questions regarding their awareness of the risks of trafficking. Immediately after the performance, they asked many of the same questions again to see what the audience had learned. Responses indicated that the event was an effective educational tool. The entire spectacle ended with performances of traditional Akha songs and dances in typical Akha dress. The NLC views this as a key component of the campaign, noting that it attracts villagers who otherwise might not attend if trafficking were the sole topic covered.

16. (U) Since it began carrying out activities under the grant in June 2008, the NLC has presented the drama in over 30 hill tribe villages throughout northern Thailand, and estimates it has reached between 7,000-8,000 highlanders. This far exceeds the NLC's target of 2,500 set out in the grant proposal it had submitted to the Department.

The Extent of the Problem: Whom to Believe?

17. (SBU) According to one of the village's elected representatives, who sits on the district's administrative council, the village does not have a problem either with drug or human trafficking. Villagers commented that many female residents leave the village to work in Pattaya and other cities in Thailand, and one villager said many of them do not return.

CHIANG MAI 00000060 002.2 OF 002

(Comment: We do not know in what industry these women sought work, or if they did so involuntarily. Even if they were sex workers, we cannot conclude that they are trafficking victims; in Thailand, including in the city of Pattaya, many commercial sex workers are willing participants.)

18. (SBU) Separately, NGO workers in the village noted that it is much better off economically than other villages in the same area, and that just 10-15 years ago, it was much poorer than it is today, with housing that was much more rudimentary. They also spoke of vehicles swiftly entering and departing the village in the middle of the night as if they were trying to hide their presence, but could not explicitly link these observations to any illicit activity.

Strange Tale of Buddhist Novice Induction

19. (SBU) One anecdote we heard highlighted a lack of awareness of the risks of exploitation. About a week before our trip, about 12 boys from the village were taken by a Buddhist monk to a monastery, where they were apparently forcibly inducted as novices. According to the villagers (none of whom are Buddhist), the monk lured them there by promising to take them to Chiang Rai City for an outing. While at the monastery, the boys were treated as typical novices: heads shaved, forced to pray, sought food donations with monks, and carried out routine maintenance on monastery grounds, such as picking up trash and cleaning. The father of one of the boys told us he didn't think much of their absence, since his son had said he'd be with the monk in Chiang Rai. (Note: many Thai boys serve as novices, informally called "wat boys," during the March-May summer vacation. Parents often send them for stints lasting up to two months, and there are government programs supporting novice stays at Buddhist wats. We do not have further details about this particular wat, the monk in question, or the incident, and

are seeking additional details from the NLC. Nonetheless, the incident is surprising given that none of the villagers are known to practice Buddhism.) NGO and UN contacts we met with on April 29 expressed surprise, saying this was the first such incident they had heard of involving non-Buddhist children.

¶10. (SBU) Though the boys with whom we spoke did not report any other abuses, one of the 12 boys drowned in a river near the monastery and died. According to the other children, several of them were playing in the river, and the deceased had managed to save the lives of others before succumbing. Although he was the only child who did not return safely to the village, the children told us they were not the only boys taken to the monastery against their will. One with whom we spoke estimated there were some 20 other boys from other villages forcibly inducted as novices at the same monastery. During our visit, the deceased boy's father went to report the entire incident to the police. However, he did not return prior to our departure, and was therefore unable to give us an update on any impending investigation into the matter.

¶11. (SBU) We subsequently learned from NGO contacts that the monk who took the boys to the monastery is now residing in the village with his mother. Our contacts also told us two more senior monks went to the village and gave some \$600 to the boy's family to assist with funeral expenses. The villagers warned the monks not to take children from there in the future without the knowledge of their parents. Our contacts told us the family of the deceased boy is unlikely to press charges due to the monks' gesture of kindness and the family's belief that doing so would not allow his spirit to rest in peace.

¶12. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Bangkok.
MOORE